

Sermon: "Inconvenient Discipleship"

Text: Luke 9:57-62.

Sermon Outline.

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Introduction ~ **Jesus of Nazareth says to you and me, "If anyone would be My disciple, you better first count the cost. It will cost you something to follow Me as My disciple. Count the cost."**

Li Tianen is one of the patriarchs of the Church in China. Li was born in Fangcheng County, Henan Province, in 1928. His grandfather was converted through the preaching of **Hudson Taylor**, one of our missionaries and the founder of the China Inland Mission.

In 1960, after the failure of Mao's Great Leap Forward, Li was arrested in yet another round-up of potential opposition and sentenced to ten years in prison... all because of his faith in Jesus.

Li was assigned to a labor camp in Anhui Province, working winter and summer in thin pajamas. **Once, he fell down a slag heap and was thought to have died.** Li said his soul was flying around the camp and he was observing what was going on from above. "I was dead for more than ninety minutes." Meanwhile the camp doctor was working on him, trying to see if Li could be resuscitated. Giving up, the doctor ordered the other prisoners to dig a grave.

Suddenly, Li opened his eyes. The doctor leaned over and asked him who he was.

"I am Li Tianen," he replied right away.

"Do you believe in God?"

"Yes, I do."

"I believe in God now," said the doctor. He could not understand how life had returned to a prisoner who had stopped breathing and had no discernible pulse.

On his release in 1970, Li returned to his family in Shanghai. He was re-arrested in 1976 and released in 1979. This was when his most productive and significant work began. Li Tianen trained an entire generation of house church leaders. He founded what became the largest of all the church-networks in China, the Fangcheng fellowship, named after the county

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of its origin. In the 1980's, Li preached in every province of China except Tibet, Guizhou and Xinjiang.

The Fangcheng network now has more than four million Chinese believers as disciples of Jesus Christ. Li Tianen is just one Chinese believer in Jesus Christ who knows by experience the cost of following Jesus as His disciple.

Our text this morning bluntly points out the costs of discipleship to Jesus. This passage links up with Luke's basic verse on discipleship, a verse that occurs earlier in Luke Chapter Nine, verse twenty-three (23). Jesus says to you and me: "If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross *daily* and follow Me."

The purpose of this passage is to headline and lay out the costs of becoming and being a real disciple of Jesus.

. Jesus initiates the process of discipleship by calling an individual.

It's not your bright idea; it's His sovereign choice.

. Before a person responds, Jesus demands that person consider the cost of following Jesus as His disciple...

. Because once you decide to follow Jesus, there can be no turning back. The consequences stretch over the horizon into eternity. *The key truth in our text is basic to the Christian faith anywhere on the face of the earth.*

? Jesus calls you and me to a costly discipleship. Jesus calls you to become something more than an admirer of God. He calls you to become more than merely a convert to some intellectual system of belief. He also calls you to become more than a player who only sits on the bench out in the bull-pen. **Jesus calls you and me to become and be a fully committed disciple.**

? In the Gospels, Jesus lays out the basics of the discipleship to which He calls you and me.

I. The first basic in discipleship to Jesus is this: *Discipleship to Jesus is big; in fact, it's far bigger than you can imagine.*

A. When Jesus first called Peter, Andrew James and John there on the shores of Galilee, He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you

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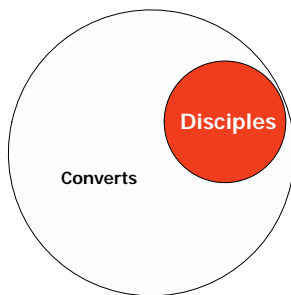
become fishers of men." Mark 1:17. Fishers of men – it was bigger than anyone could imagine.

Friend, for these next few moments, I want you to consider the possibility that what you may have always understood about becoming and being disciple may be one of two things – either too small or maybe even completely mistaken. How could that possibly be the case? Stay with me, please.

Sometimes, what you were taught growing up turns out not to be the truth or the facts at all.

For example, this past week, I spotted a fascinating news story on the internet. The scientists and astrophysicists have discovered an amazing thing about Titan, the largest moon of Jupiter. **All the oceans on Titan are made up of hydrocarbons – hydrocarbons, like the oil and natural gas we pull up out of the ground in Texas and Saudi Arabia and Alaska.** We were all taught to refer to oil and natural gas as what? "Fossil fuels," something that was produced when organic matter, like leaves and dinosaurs, rotted under immense pressure, etc. We have now discovered that hydrocarbons occur outside of planet Earth... which means that what we were taught in school was incomplete, if not totally bogus. No giant ferns or dinosaurs on Titan!

Well, I believe that for years we have taught an incomplete picture of discipleship in the American churches. And, yes, I'm now convinced that, in the American churches, we have "dumbed down" the imperative call of Jesus to discipleship.



No doubt you remember this basic diagram from last Fall. The diagram about the difference between being merely a convert and being a disciple. As you can see from this diagram, there is a huge difference between becoming merely a convert and becoming and being a disciple of Jesus.

Friend, it's almost a total mistake to

equate "convert" with "disciple." They are not one and the same. You can easily be a convert without ever becoming a disciple of Jesus. But Jesus calls you and me to a costly discipleship.

1. You see, a convert believes the basic message about what God did through Jesus, His death and resurrection – the message of salvation. I believe the truth and the facts of that Good News, that Gospel, completely. **But a disciple is more than a person who trusts that message about Jesus. More than merely a convert, a disciple has a total personal allegiance to the risen Jesus.**
2. **Furthermore, you can be a convert to Jesus and know next to nothing about the Four Gospels. The true disciple of Jesus knows the teaching of Jesus thoroughly.** Are you a convert or a disciple?
3. **A step further. You can be a convert without ever attempting to live out the teaching of Jesus.** A true disciple of Jesus recognizes that the risen Jesus expects His disciples and you and me actually live out His teaching.

In the ancient world, the Greek academy had the concept of changing one's thinking to change one's behavior. Right thinking produces right acting. In Jesus' day, the Hebrews knew all about the Greek academy. But the Jews had a better idea from God.

The Hebrew concept is the flip-side of the Greek concept. Right acting leads to right thinking. It involves acting your way to a new way of thinking. That's what is going on when Jesus calls people to "Come, follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men." Jesus calls those men to live with Him, hang out with Him, and learn a better way to live – the kingdom of God.

From the beginning, life transformation and behavior change are essential to discipleship.

4. **This brings us to the fourth item in discipleship. The disciple is transformed as a person into becoming more and more like Jesus Christ.** You can be a convert without resembling the personal character of Jesus in any way. But the disciple? The moment you act on Jesus' teaching out of personal loyalty to Him, the process of change begins in your person; and

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Jesus begins to change who you are, how you think, what you do and what you feel about yourself and other people around you.

5. **And as you become more and more like Jesus, you find yourself making other disciples of Jesus.** You find yourself enabling other people to become disciples of Jesus Christ. In this enterprise, a mere convert might be completely lost at sea; but a disciple of Jesus has their bearings and knows where they're going and who they're taking with them.

Let me stop and summarize for all of us for a moment...

Beyond the moment you believe in Jesus, His death and resurrection, the moment accept Jesus and enter personal salvation, there are five specific elements in personal discipleship to Jesus:

- 1) a total personal allegiance to Jesus;
- 2) a thorough working knowledge of Jesus' teaching;
- 3) the commitment to live out the teaching of Jesus at every point of your life;
- 4) which bring about God's goal for your life, "Christ-likeness," your becoming more and more like Jesus Christ your Lord; and
- 5) you begin reproducing disciples and enabling other persons to become disciples of Jesus. **In the Gospel of Matthew, the Great Commission says what? "Make disciples!"**

A couple of weeks ago, we explored the American cultural way of "doing church," something we called 'consumerist Christianity.' In this schema, what's most important in doing church is this...

1. **Personal convenience** – you attend a church that's designed for quick and easy access at your prerogative... your likes and personal preferences.
2. **Personal comfort** – not just comfortable pews and amenities, but emotional and stylistic comfort as well – a mind-set of personal comfort as basic to the Christian faith...
3. **Choices** – multiple offerings and program options across the whole span of possible human situations and lifestyles.

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4. **Minimal cost** – only a one hour-and-a-half time slot per week is hoped for. One Sunday out of four is acceptable. Plus, an offering. Maybe. But no obligation to do anything further, learn anything further, live anything further, or become more than what you are right now.

5. **And in many American churches, there is simply no expectation of any kind of personal change.**

Friend, which approach to discipleship do you see operating in the Chinese churches? Are they producing comfortable converts or dangerous disciples?

I believe this nation of ours is in desperate need for some dangerous disciples of Jesus!

II. There is a second basic in the discipleship to which Jesus calls a person: the cost.

Discipleship is far bigger than your personal concerns, dreams, hopes, ambitions and career goals. Discipleship to Jesus is not a matter of personal convenience.

Becoming and being a disciple of Jesus can cost you everything you have to gain a universe and a future this world can never give.

In our text, Jesus engages in conversation one person at the point of decision. He points out one possible price-tag of discipleship – homelessness.

There, **in verse 58**, burying one's parents was an expected responsibility and personal obligation of every grown Jewish son or daughter. Jesus declares that being a disciple is an obligation even higher than that – especially the obligation to go forth and proclaim the Kingdom of God.

Verses 61 and 62 are unique to Luke's Gospel. Jesus warns you and me about a divided focus. Discipleship to Jesus requires an undivided personal focus. A total focus on the kingdom of God is a non-negotiable requirement for the disciple of Jesus.

A. You can be a convert to Jesus and pay no price; thousands of believers do this across America. But is that really the discipleship to which Jesus calls us?

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Conclusion ~ **This Chinese pastor, Ming Xuan Zhang, also runs several orphanages in Hubei Province.** Churches all over China engage in this kind of 'mercy ministry,' running hundreds of orphanages across China.

This past Christmas, Ming Xuan Zhang and his orphans were evicted right out on the street on Christmas Day.

Once they were evicted, officials from the Public Safety Bureau beat the children along with the care-takers. This episode was not the first eviction.

Every place Ming Xuan Zhang and the orphans rent, the building landlord is approached by officials from the Public Safety Bureau. The Bureau officials tell the landlord that unless he evicts the Pastor and the orphans, they will have to shut down all the landlord's apartments and throw the landlord into prison. On three separate occasions, landlords were threatened not to rent space to Zhang and the orphans, or face criminal charges and prison time. **With no real choice, the landlord evicted the Pastor and his orphans after five years of faithful tenancy. Zhang and the children continue to remain homeless as they search for permanent living space.**

In 2006, US President George W. Bush requested a meeting with Ming Xuan Zhang during his visit to China, but he was denied by Communist Party officials. Zhang and his son were kidnapped at a Beijing suburban train station after CPC officials discovered he had been invited to meet the President.

Government officials continue to persecute this pastor for his leadership role in the Chinese House Churches. Ming Xuan Zhang has been imprisoned 12 times by Government officials, who are trying to isolate him from the Chinese house church alliance.

Have you ever wondered how you personally would make out if you were suddenly a believer in China?

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Jesus calls you and me to a costly, not a convenient, discipleship. Jesus says to you and me, "If anyone would be My disciple, count the cost, and come, follow Me."